

1949-1958, Syria: Early Experiments in Covert Action

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On August 12, 1957, the Syrian army surrounded the U.S. embassy in Damascus. Claiming to have aborted a CIA plot to overthrow neutralist President Shukri Quwatly and install a pro-Western regime, Syrian chief of counterintelligence Abdul Hamid Sarraj expelled three U.S. diplomats, jailed dozens of officers and moved closer to Moscow. By month's end, the U.S., along with Turkey and Iraq, was considering an action that could have escalated into a full-scale, Soviet-U.S. confrontation. This abortive CIA coup plot capped nearly a decade of covert U.S. meddling in Syria. As early as 1949, this newly independent Arab republic was an important staging ground for the CIA's earliest experiments in covert action.

The CIA secretly encouraged a right-wing military coup in 1949. Repeated CIA covert action during the following decade stimulated Arab anti-Americanism, drove the Syrian left closer to the Kremlin, and made overt military involvement more likely.

In late 1945, the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) announced plans to construct the Trans-Arabian Pipe Line (TAPLINE) from Saudi Arabia to the Mediterranean. With U.S. help, ARAMCO secured rights-of-way from Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The Syrian right-of-way was stalled in parliament.

Violent anti-U.S., anti-Israeli demonstrations in November 1948, forced Prime Minister Mardam to resign. He was succeeded by Khalid al-Azm. During this crisis, CIA operative Stephen Meade, made contact with right-wing Syrian army officers.

Declassified records confirm that beginning in November 1948, Meade met secretly with Syrian Army Chief of Staff Col. Husni Zaim at least six times to discuss the "possibility [of an] army supported dictatorship." U.S. officials realized that Zaim was a "'Banana Republic' dictator type" with a "strong anti-Soviet attitude."

Meade and Zaim completed



Building the Arabian American Oil Company's Trans-Arabian Pipe Line from Saudi Arabia to Syria.

plans for the coup in early 1949. On 14 March, Zaim "requested U.S. agents [to] provoke and abet internal disturbances 'essential for *coup d'etat*' or that U.S. funds be given him [for] this purpose." Nine days later, Zaim "promised a 'surprise' within several days" if Meade could secure U.S. help. As rumors of a military coup grew stronger, Assistant Secretary of State George McGhee arrived in Damascus, ostensibly to discuss resettling Palestinian refugees but possibly to authorize U.S. support for Zaim. Shortly thereafter, students protesting government corruption and mishandling of the war with Israel took to the streets. On 30 March, Zaim staged his coup, arrested Quwatly and suspended the constitution. Meade reported on 15 April that "over 400 Commies [in] all parts of Syria have been arrested."

Zaim's performance far exceeded Washington's expectations. On 28 April, he told the U.S. ambassador that Syria was resuming peace talks with Israel and would consider resettling 250,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria. On 16 May, Zaim approved ARAMCO's TAPLINE. Two weeks later he banned the Communist Party and jailed dozens of left-wing dissidents. In July, he signed a Syro-Israeli armistice. Zaim anticipated swift U.S. approval for \$100 million in military and economic aid. However, on 14 August, Zaim was overthrown and executed by Col. Sami Hinnawi.

Almost at once, the frictions that had bedeviled Syria-U.S. relations

reappeared. Elections in November produced a victory for Hinnawi's Populist Party, which announced plans for a Syrian union with Iraq's Hashemite dynasty. On December 19, 1949, Col. Adib Shishakli ousted Hinnawi in Syria's third coup in nine months. This was the first of what would become seven civilian cabinets in 23 months.

The U.S. again encouraged a military quick-fix, this time with Shishakli cast in Zaim's strongman role. Shishakli had approached U.S. officials in March 1950 seeking "military aid for army modernization 'to maintain order.'" U.S. officials realized that Shishakli was "one of the strongest anti-Communist forces in the country." Washington hinted that Syria might soon receive U.S. weapons.

U.S. officials confirmed in early July that "Shishakli had been making friendly overtures." One of his chief lieutenants asked the U.S. military attaché, "What do you want us to do?" Shishakli had a "cordial 2 hour discussion" with the CIA's Miles Copeland and others at the U.S. embassy on November 23, 1951. When Ma'aruf Dawalibi, long regarded by U.S. observers as pro-Soviet, announced a week later that he would head Syria's eighth cabinet in less than two years, Shishakli dissolved parliament and set up a military dictatorship.

U.S. officials were aware of Shishakli's plans in advance and welcomed his coup. *Chargé d'affaires* Harlan Clark cabled Washington on 30 November that "if U.S. is to profit from

new situation, it will be more than ever necessary...to show Shishakli how and when we can help him." The State Department won Pentagon approval "on political grounds" within days for "early delivery to Syria...of a limited amount of selected military material."

In short order, Syria initiated mutual defense talks with Turkey and renewed the TAPLINE concession. Shishakli was willing to consider a peace treaty with Israel and the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Syria provided substantial U.S. financial and military aid was forthcoming. In 1952, the Truman administration pressed the World Bank to expedite Syria's request for a \$200 million loan.

Before they could reach a deal on an arms package, Shishakli was overthrown in an army-orchestrated coup on February 25, 1954. The Communist Party, whose membership had been halved and whose leaders had been driven underground by Shishakli, saw the coup as the first step toward a national front with the Ba'athists and others opposed to Western influence.

When the Syrians went to the polls on 24 September, they favored the Ba'ath and other left-wing parties and sent Khalid Bakdash to parliament as the first freely elected Communist Party deputy in the Arab world. CIA director Allen Dulles agreed that "the situation in that country is the worst of all the countries in that area."

With Washington's blessing, Britain and Iraq announced plans in January 1955 for the Baghdad Pact, a regional defense organization modeled on NATO. A "progressive front," backed by Col. Adnan Malki, opposed Syrian participation. Syria joined Egypt in calling for Arab nonalignment and Malki worked with Egyptian president Nasser to undermine Iraq's pro-Western premier. If Malki or other left-wing officers seized power and concluded a formal alliance with Egypt, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles remarked that Syria's "anti-Western policies" could trigger "Iraqi military intervention" or worse, "Israeli military action against one or several Arab states."

On April 22, Malki was assassinated by a gunman from the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), a right-wing group that had supported

Shishakli and was rumored to have close ties with the CIA. Operation Straggle, to topple anti-Western leaders in Damascus, differed from the earlier Zaim and Shishakli episodes because the U.S. cooperated with Britain. U.S. Ambassador Moose suggested on 8 January that "thought be given to other methods," including an "anti-Communist coup" engineered by the SSNP. In March, Allen Dulles and CIA Middle East chief Kermit Roosevelt flew to London, where they worked out the details for the coup with Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS).

The original CIA-SIS plan appears to have called for Turkey to stage border incidents, British operatives to stir up the desert tribes, and U.S. agents to mobilize SSNP guerrillas, all of which would trigger a pro-Western coup by "indigenous anticommunist elements within Syria" supported, if necessary, by Iraqi troops. Nasser's seizure of the Suez Canal on July 26, 1956, however, disrupted joint Anglo-U.S. planning for Straggle.

London subordinated Straggle to its top-secret plans for intervention in Egypt. The British, Foster Dulles complained on 18 October, were "deliberately keeping us in the dark." Washington moved forward with plans for the coup and provided \$150,000 to the conspirators. At the last minute, the SIS persuaded the CIA to postpone Straggle for four days, so that, unbeknownst to the Americans, it would coincide with the British-backed Israeli invasion of the Sinai. Secretary Dulles and President Eisenhower were doubly surprised, first by Israel's lightning assault on Egypt and then by word that Syrian counterintelligence had uncovered Straggle. On 30 October, Foster and Allen Dulles agreed that "it would be a mistake to try to pull it off."

During an unprecedented New Year's Day meeting with key legislative leaders, Eisenhower requested congressional authorization to use U.S. troops to counter Soviet subversion in the Middle East. He "cited Syrian developments as evidence of Russian intent." The House approved, 355 to 61 on January 30, 1957, and the Eisenhower Doctrine went into effect.

In August, Washington apparently gave authorization for Operation Wappen, the code name for the new

U.S. covert operation against Syria. Howard Stone, a CIA political action specialist with experience in Iran and Sudan, had been planning a coup with dissidents inside the Syrian army for three months. Meanwhile, Shishakli assured Kermit Roosevelt that he was ready to reassume power in Syria. According to Charles Yost, a former U.S. ambassador to Syria, Wappen was "a particularly clumsy CIA plot" and was "penetrated by Syrian intelligence." Patrick Seale in *Struggle for Syria* agrees: "Half a dozen Syrian officers approached by U.S. officials immediately reported back to the authorities so that the plot was doomed.

Syrian counterintelligence chief Sarraj reacted swiftly on August 12, expelling Stone and other CIA agents, arresting their accomplices and placing the U.S. embassy under surveillance. Left-wing Colonel Bizri used the fiasco as an excuse to wrest control of the army from his moderate rivals.

The U.S. encouraged Turkey and Iraq to mass troops along their borders with Syria; and "if Syrian aggression should provoke a military reaction," Washington would "expedite shipments of arms to the Middle East and would replace losses as quickly as possible." "The Sixth Fleet was ordered again to the eastern end of the Mediterranean," U.S. jets were sent to a NATO base in Turkey, and U.S. "'ready' forces, particularly the Strategic Air Command, were alerted." For the second time in a year, an abortive CIA operation in Syria nearly triggered a superpower confrontation.

Eisenhower gradually edged away from the provocative scheme but the Turks refused to demobilize the 50,000 troops they had massed along the Syrian frontier.

As 10,000 U.S. marines waded ashore at Beirut on July 15, Eisenhower pondered U.S. problems in the Arab world. "The trouble is we have a campaign of hatred against us, not by the governments but by the people."

Source: Excerpts from "Cold War and Covert Action: The U.S. and Syria, 1945-1958," *Middle East Journal*, Winter 1990.

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